

Dear Mr. President

Teacher Guide



SUMMARY:

Students will analyze a letter written to President Abraham Lincoln, then write and send their own letters to the president of the United States.

RATIONALE:

Analyzing and composing persuasive writing are important skills for modern society. The ability to understand how and what arguments are being presented enables young people to develop into critics of the opinions they encounter through personal contact and through visual, listening, and written media. In order to express their opinions to other people in society, children also must learn how to compose persuasive arguments. This activity guides the child through the process of composing an argument after examining a successful, historical model.



Abraham Lincoln was assassinated on April 14, 1865. Objects owned by or associated with Abraham Lincoln quickly became relics, reminding Americans of Lincoln's greatness and challenging them to keep his ideals alive. One of the Smithsonian Institution's most treasured icons is this top hat, worn by Lincoln to Ford's Theatre on the night of his assassination.



This campaign sign was collected by the National Museum of American History's curators at the 2008 Democratic National Convention. Barack Obama was elected president on November 4, 2008.

Read the "Activity Guide" page for step-by-step instructions.

OBJECTIVES: The students will be better able to

- analyze a persuasive argument.
- develop a persuasive letter.
- name the current president of the United States of America.

TIME:

- 10 minutes to read and analyze Grace's letter
- 10 minutes to brainstorm and outline
- amount of research varies by topic and age of students
- 20 minutes to write
- 10 minutes to proofread

RECOMMENDED AGE GROUP: 3rd–4th Grades, can be adapted for 5th–12th Grades

TARGET VOCABULARY:

- **argument:** discourse intended to persuade
- **candidate:** one that aspires to or is nominated or qualified for an office, membership, or award
- **persuade:** to move by argument, entreaty, or expostulation to a belief, position, or course of action
- **president:** the title given to the chief executive officer in a republic, such as the United States of America
- **thesis:** a position or proposition that a person advances and offers to maintain by argument

MATERIALS:

- Activity Guide sheet (*attached*)
- Background sheet (*attached*)
- Read Grace Bedell's Historic Letter sheet (*attached*)
- (*recommended*) Computer(s) with Internet
- *EITHER* Writing materials, envelope, and stamp *OR* computer with e-mail, *OR* fax machine

PREPARATION:

- If you are working with younger students, consider beginning the activity by reading *Mr. Lincoln's Whiskers* together. *Mr. Lincoln's Whiskers* is a storybook that focuses on an example of when a child's letter to the president made a difference. For tips on reading this book together, check out the Our Story **Guided Reading Activity** (http://americanhistory.si.edu/ourstoryinhistory/tryathome/pdf/Reading_Whiskers.pdf).
- Internet access is recommended because Read, Write, Think's web site for **Letters to the President** has several materials that can support this activity (http://www.readwritethink.org/lesson_images/lesson1094/NWPResources.html).
- Students can use the **Persuasive Map** to analyze and create persuasive arguments (http://www.readwritethink.org/materials/persuasion_map/).
- Students can also use the **Letter Generator's** letter templates to make sure they include all the parts of a letter (http://readwritethink.org/materials/letter_generator/).
- Consider using the lesson plans to generate ideas for possible themes for the class to address, like writing persuasive letters about the **environment** (http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=268).
- Also consider strengthening student writing by focusing on specific skills like writing audience-specific arguments (http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=938 and http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=945).

STUDENT PERFORMANCE CRITERIA:

- Name the current president of the United States of America.
- Express their thoughts and feelings.
- Identify and restate the main idea and cite supporting details.
- Organize information to convey a central idea.
- Revise and edit written work.

STANDARDS:

NCHS History Standards

K–4 Historical Thinking Standards

- 2B: Reconstruct the literal meaning of a historical passage.
- 2C: Identify the central question(s).
- 5E: Formulate a position or course of action on an issue.
- 5F: Identify the solution.

K–4 History Content Standards

- 4C: The student understands historic figures who have exemplified values and principles of American democracy.
- 4D: The student understands events that celebrate and exemplify fundamental values and principles of American democracy.

5–12 Historical Thinking Standards

- 2B: Reconstruct the literal meaning of a historical passage.
- 2C: Identify the central question(s).
- 2E: Read historical narratives imaginatively.
- 2I: Draw upon the visual, literary, and musical sources.
- 5E: Formulate a position or course of action on an issue.

5–12 U.S. History Content Standards

- Era 5: Civil War and Reconstruction (1850–1877)
- Era 10: Contemporary United States (1968 to the present)

IRA/NCTE Language Arts Standards

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

ISTE Education Technology Standards for Students (NETS.S)

Creativity and Innovation

B. Create original works as a means of personal or group expression.

Critical Thinking, Problem Solving and Decision Making

A. Identify and define authentic problems and significant questions for investigation.

C. Collect and analyze data to identify solutions and/or make informed decisions.

Technology Operations and Concepts

B. Understand and use technology systems.

21st-Century Skills

Learning and Innovation Skills

Critical Thinking and Problem Solving

Information, Media, and Technology Skills

ICT (Information, Communications, and Technology) Literacy

Life and Career Skills

Social and Cross-Cultural Skills

CRITERIA	Level One	Level Two	Level Three	Level Four
<i>Express their thoughts and feelings</i>	briefly expresses their thoughts and feelings	sufficiently expresses their thoughts and feelings	skillfully expresses their thoughts and feelings	insightfully expresses their thoughts and feelings
<i>Identify and restate the main idea and cite supporting details</i>	identifies and restates the main idea and cites supporting details with assistance	adequately identifies and restates the main idea and cites supporting details	competently identifies and restates the main idea and cites supporting details	masterfully identifies and restates the main idea and cites supporting details
<i>Organize information to convey a central idea</i>	organizes information to convey a central idea with assistance	adequately organizes information to convey a central idea	competently organizes information to convey a central idea	expertly organizes information to convey a central idea
<i>Revise and edit written work</i>	is beginning to revise and edit written work	revises and edits written work with satisfactory success	revises and edits written work with considerable success	revises and edits written work with outstanding success

★ Dear Mr. President ★

★ Suggested Resources ★

For more activities and information about the presidents of the United States of America, visit [The American Presidency: A Glorious Burden](http://americanhistory.si.edu/presidency/) (<http://americanhistory.si.edu/presidency/>).



For biographical information on the current president of the United States of America, visit [The Presidential Biography](http://www.whitehouse.gov/president/) (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/president/>).

For teens and advanced readers/writers, you can read contemporary letters to the president from teenagers at [Writing Our Future: Letters to the Next President](http://www.letters2president.org/) (<http://www.letters2president.org/>).

For a video of National Museum of American History curators talking about the artifacts they collected from the 2008 Democratic and Republican National Conventions, visit [Collecting The Presidential Campaigns](http://blog.americanhistory.si.edu/osaycanyousee/from_the_collections/) (http://blog.americanhistory.si.edu/osaycanyousee/from_the_collections/).

For more activities about Abraham Lincoln and Grace Bedell's letter, visit [Our Story: A Letter to Abraham Lincoln](http://americanhistory.si.edu/ourstoryinhistory/tryathome/lincolnletter.html) (<http://americanhistory.si.edu/ourstoryinhistory/tryathome/lincolnletter.html>).

For a picture book about Abraham Lincoln and Grace Bedell's letter, read: Winnick, Karen. *Mr. Lincoln's Whiskers*. Honesdale, PA: Boyds Mills Press, 1996.)

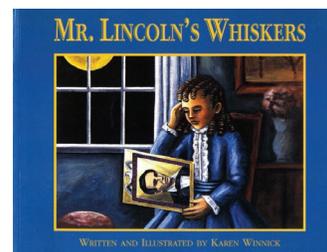


Image of Mr. Lincoln's Whiskers by Karen Winnick. Text and illustrations (c) 1996 by Karen Winnick. Used by permission of Boyds Mills Press. All rights reserved.



Presidential inaugurations are public holidays, a time when all Americans can celebrate our democratic customs and creed. There is much to celebrate for, once again, America's political torch has been passed in peace. This pennant commemorates the inauguration of Woodrow Wilson in Washington, D.C. on March 4, 1913.

★ Dear Mr. President ★

★ Activity Guide ★

1. Take a look at Grace Bedell's letter to Abraham Lincoln on the Read Grace Bedell's Letter sheet. Who is Grace's audience? How does she make her letter specifically address the needs of her audience?

TIP: If you would like to build children's use of audience-specific **arguments**, consider using the lesson plans for [Exploring Audience in Persuasive Letter Writing](http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=945) (http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=945) or [Using Logical, Audience-Specific Arguments](http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=938) (http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=938).

2. Grace's letter was successful, so look at her **argument** to find each of the following parts of a **persuasive** letter.

- Goal or **thesis**
- Main reasons that support her **thesis**

TIP: Children can record their findings using Read, Write, Think's [Persuasion Map](http://www.readwritethink.org/materials/persuasion_map/) (http://www.readwritethink.org/materials/persuasion_map/).

3. Now choose a topic for your letter to the president. Here are a few ideas:

- Tell him why he should continue to support or change his opinion on a specific topic (e.g. the environment, healthcare, education).
- Offer advice about a specific problem facing our country.
- Call his attention to a local problem he may not know about.

4. Begin planning your **persuasive** letter to the **president**. Make sure you include:

- Goal or **thesis** that clearly tells the **president** what you believe
- Main reasons that support your **thesis**
- Facts or examples that support each of your main reasons. To find the strongest examples, you may need to do research.

TIP: Children can build their **arguments** using Read, Write, Think's [Persuasion Map](http://www.readwritethink.org/materials/persuasion_map/) (http://www.readwritethink.org/materials/persuasion_map/).

5. Write your letter and make sure you include:

- Your full name
- Your complete address
- Your **argument**
- Thanks for the **president's** attention

TIP: Children can create their letters using the templates on Read, Write, Think's [Letter Generator](http://readwritethink.org/materials/letter_generator/) (http://readwritethink.org/materials/letter_generator/).

6. Before sending your letter, proofread it and ask a parent, friend, or teacher to proofread it too.

7. Decide whether you will be sending the letter by e-mail or by postal mail.

- By e-mail: Find the **president's** e-mail address at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/contact/>. Even though you would probably get a response back in e-mail format, still include your complete address so the **president** will know where you are writing from.

- By postal mail: Address your letter and envelope to:

President _____ (Last name of **president**)
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20500

- By fax: Print your letter and fax it to (202) 456-7705.

★ Dear Mr. President ★

★ Background Information ★

Letters are especially helpful to historians because they are lasting records of people's thoughts and ideas. A letter can be a powerful form of communication and can be used to **persuade** others.

In a famous **persuasive** letter to **presidential candidate** Abraham Lincoln, 11-year-old Grace Bedell suggested that Lincoln change his looks in order to get elected.

You can read the story of Grace's letter in *Mr. Lincoln's Whiskers* by Karen Winnick.

In a letter to **President** Dwight Eisenhower, 15-year old Ronald Becker explained how excited he was that Alaska would become the 49th state in the United States of America. He also sent the **president** his suggestion for a new design for the American flag.

While he was in office as the **president**, Richard Nixon got sick with pneumonia. 8-year old John W. James, III wrote to the **president** wishing him a quick recovery and giving advice on how to get better fast.

Have you ever convinced someone to see your point of view or to change their mind about something? Have you read or written a letter?

Then you can write to the **president** just like Grace!

If you wrote a letter to the **president**, what would you say?

- ◆ Are you worried a problem in your town or the rest of the world?
- ◆ Do you have news or advice to share?
- ◆ Do you have questions to ask?

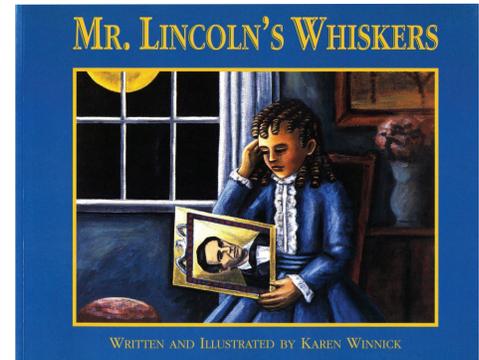


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Visit

<http://americanhistory.si.edu/ourstoryinhistory/lincolnletter.html> for fun activities about this book.



See all of these letters online at <http://americanhistory.si.edu/presidency/5a2d.html>.

Read Grace Bedell's historic letter → Choose a topic → Write to the president

★ Dear Mr. President ★

★ Read Grace Bedell's Historic Letter ★

In this famous letter to **presidential candidate** Abraham Lincoln, 11-year-old Grace suggests that Lincoln change his looks. Do you think Lincoln followed her advice?

Here is a copy of her letter:

Dear Sir

My father has just [come] home from the fair and brought home your picture and Mr. [Hannibal] Hamlin's. I am a little girl only 11 years old, but want you should be President of the United States very much so I hope you won't think me very bold to write to such a great man as you are. Have you any little girls about as large as I am if so give them my love and tell her to write to me if you cannot answer this letter. I have got 4 brother's and part of them will vote for your any way and if you will let your whiskers grow I will try and get the rest of them to vote for you you would look a great deal better for your face is so thin. All the ladies like whiskers and they would tease their husband's to vote for you and if I was a man I would vote for you to but I will try and get every one to vote for you that I can. I think that rail fence around your picture makes it look very pretty. I have got a little baby sister she is nine weeks old and is just as cunning as can be. When you direct your letter dir[e]ct to Grace Bedell Westfield Chatauque County New York.

I must not write any more answer this letter right off Good bye

Grace Bedell

Soon after receiving her letter, Abraham Lincoln wrote back to Grace and by the time he was elected **president** he had grown whiskers!

Later, when Lincoln was **campaigning** in Westfield, New York, Grace got to meet him.

To see Grace's letter and Lincoln's response, visit <http://americanhistory.si.edu/presidency/5a2d.html>

